DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 589 TM 012 526

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TITLE Teachers' Attributions for Students' Low Achievement: A Validation of Cooper and Good's Attributional Categories.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attribution Theory; Classroom Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Low Achievement; Primary Education; Student Behavior; *Student Evaluation; Student Motivation; *Teacher Attitudes; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Teacher's explanations for students' low achievement were reliably classified using the attributional coding system proposed by H. M. Cooper and T. L. Good (1983). Study subjects were 20 male and 24 female teachers enrolled in graduate classes at a midwestern university. All grade-level teaching assignments (primary school through college/university levels) were represented in the sample. Teachers completed a four-part structured questionnaire covering perceived reasons for poor work by students, methods of working with students and satisfaction with the instructional environment, expectations for students' future work, and feelings about students. Teachers most frequently attributed low achievement to a typical pattern of low effort. They viewed acquired student characteristics (i.e., poor work habits) as more important than either teacher variables or classroom variables in explaining students' low achievement. Implications of these attribution patterns for developing students' self-esteem are discussed. Three data tables conclude the document. (TJH)

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# Teachers' Attributions for Students' Lov Achievement: A Validation of Cooper and Good's Attributional Categories

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Educational Research Association in Chicago, 1988.

TM 012 526

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Teacher's explanations for students' low achievement were reliably classified using the attributional coding system proposed by Cooper and Good. Teachers most frequently attributed low achievement to a typical pattern of low effort. They viewed acquired student characteristics (e.g., poor work habits) as more important than either teacher variables or classroom variables in explaining students' low achievement. Implications of these attribution patterns for developing students' self-esteem are discussed.

Attribution theory is concerned with the causes or dimensions that people use to explain their own behavior or the behavior of other people. Educators have focused their attention on the reasons (a) that students give to explain their academic success or failures (Bar-Tal & Darom, 1979; Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, & Rosenbuam, 1971) and (b) that teachers give to explain students' success or failures (Cooper & Burger, 1980; Cooper & Good, 1983; Medway, 1979; Tollefson, Rodriguez & Franz, 1987).

In this early work, Weiner (1977) suggested that attributions to ability, effort, task difficulty and luck were the most common causes cited for academic success and/or failure. Bar-Tal and Darom (1979), Frieze (1976), Cooper and Burger (1980), and Cooper and Good (1983) used students' and teachers' responses to open-ended questions to develop more extensive coding systems for attributions. Of interest for this study were the categories of attributions developed by Cooper and Good (1983).

Cooper and Good (1983) asked 39 teachers enrolled in education classes to list why an outcome of success or failure had occurred for students that the teachers had identified as ones they expected to do well or to do poorly academically. Cooper and Good coded teachers' responses initially into 17 categories. After comparing their categories to those developed by Frieze (1976) and Bar-Tal and Darom (1979), they proposed a 12-category synthesis of the three coding systems. The categories included: ability, previous experience, acquired characteristics, typical effort, interest in the subject matter, immediate effort, attention, teacher quality, task, other students, family, physiological processes.

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The study was funded in part by a grant from the General Research Fund at the University of Kansas.

The purpose of the present study was: (a) to validate the attributional categories proposed by Cooper and Good, (b) to determine the relative importance teachers assigned to student, teacher, and environmental factors in explaining academic difficulties, and (c) to describe how teachers report they interact with low achieving students.

## Method

### Subjects

Participants for this study were 44 teachers enrolled in graduate classes in a midwestern university. Approximately equal numbers of male (n=20) and female (n=24) teachers participated, and all grade level teaching assignments (primary, intermediate, middle-level, high school, and college/university) were represented in the sample.

### Instrument

Teachers completed a four-part structured questionnaire. Initially, they responded to the following question: "Please think about a student who consistently did unsatisfactory work. Now think about the reason(s) that this particular student was doing unsatisfactory work and write a brief description of these reasons." Respondents also described the student on eight student variables: ability, achievement, effort, acquired academic characteristics, attention to academic tasks, quality of peer interactions, physical/mental health, and level of family involvement. These ratings were on a 7-point scale with "7" being the positive end of the scale.

The second part of the questionnaire asked teachers to explain how they had worked with the student and how satisfied they were with the instructional environment provided for the student. In the third section, teachers were asked to indicate which of three factors (student's characteristics, instructional

environment, teacher's skill) offered the best explanation for the student's academic difficulties. In the final section, teachers were asked their expectations for the students' future work, their pattern of interacting with the student (i.e., Did they praise or criticize the student?), and their feelings toward the student (i.e., Did they like working with the student? Were they willing to help the student? Did they become angry with the student? Did they feel sorry for the student? Did they feel guilty about the student's failure?). These items were patterned after items developed by Weiner (1984) to assess the affective and behavioral consequences of different attributions. Teachers responded using a 6-point unidimensional scale.

## Results and Discussion

Initially, the data were summarized to gain a composite picture of the demographic characteristics of students with academic difficulties. Most respondents (68%) identified male students; 11% described primary children, 27% described intermediate level children; 16% described junior high or middle level students; 23% described high school aged students; and 23% described college students.

Table 1 reports the mean ratings for the descriptor categories of ability, achievement level, amount of typical effort, acquired academic characteristics, attention to academic tasks, quality of peer interactions, physical/mental health, and degree of family involvement in the child's education. Inspection of the mean ratings suggests a relatively negative picture of these students. The students were described as displaying lov effort, exhibiting little attention to academic tasks, having personal characteristics that did not promote academic achievement, and being members of families that had lov involvement with the school. On a more positive note, however, they were

described as having average ability (only four of the 44 students were described as having low ability) as relating as well as most students to their peers, and as being healthy.

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Insert Table 1 here

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Teachers' responses to the free response question were coded by two raters using the categories proposed by Cooper and Good (1983). Table 2 summarizes the teachers' responses. The reasons for failure given by the teachers surveyed were, with 8 exceptions, reliably classified into one of Cooper and Good's 12 categories, (Inter-rate agreement between two judges was 92%). Poor attendance, emotional immaturity, and task-specific emotional problems were the reasons that did not fit the Cooper and Good categories.

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Insert Table 2 here

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Low motivation, classified as typical effort, was the most frequently cited reason for students' academic difficulties; 50% of the teachers cited low motivation as the principal reason for the student's low achievement. Family factors were the second most frequently cited causes of low achievement (30 respondents cited this cause). Acquired characteristics, (i.e., poor attitude, poorly developed study skills) and previous academic experiences, (i.e., poor academic background, inadequate preparation) were cited as causes of the student's difficulties by 21% of the teachers. Subject matter characteristics (interest in the subject and task difficulty) were not frequently cited as causes of low achievement. Poor reading ability was cited as a cause of academic difficulties, but no teacher cited low ability as a reason for low achievement.

While Cooper and Good's coding system could be applied to the data collected in this study, it masked a category that could be labeled inadequate skill development. Half of the teachers indicated that the student described lacked prequisite skills (i.e., had a reading problem (n=8), had poorly developed study skills (n=6), did not complete assignments (n=8), could not manage in-class work time (n=5), and was "always behind" because of poor attendance (n=5)). The categories that best described the reasons given by the teachers in this sample for student failure were: lov typical effort, inadequate skills to profit from instruction or to make satisfactory progress, and a nonsupportive family environment. Furthermore, it was evident that when teachers used the term, "low motivation" that they were talking about the characteristic labeled "typical effort" by Cooper and Good (1983) and that they vieved it as a stable trait.

In addition to describing the student, teachers were asked to describe their effectiveness in working with the student. Their responses to instructional questions are summarized below:

(1) 36% reported that they were able to spend as much time as they felt was necessary in working with the student

(2) 59% indicated that the instructional material were appropriate, useful, and helpful to the student.

(3) 57% reported that they would have selected different methods and materials if working with a student with similar academic difficulties.

(4) 70% reported that they had the teaching skills required to work with the student.

Teachers then indicated which one of three factors (the characteristics of the student, the instructional environment, or the skill of the teacher) was the most important contributor to the student's academic difficulties. Respondents ranked student factors as the most important contributor to the student's achievement patterns. Forty of the 44 teachers indicated that the characteristics of the student were the most important causal factor in

explaining the student's academic difficulties. Two respondents rated the instructional environment (appropriateness of the instructional material, size of the class) as the most important causal factor. One teacher rated the skill of the teacher as the most important causal factor in explaining the student's achievement.

These responses indicate that most of the teachers were satisfied with their efforts to work with the students they described. They acknowledged a need for more time and more materials, but felt that they had the training and skills to work with low achieving students. Overall, they felt that student characteristics were responsible for the student's achievement.

Finally, teachers responded to 10 statements asking them to describe their expectations for the students' future work, their pattern of interaction with the students, and their feelings toward the students. Teachers responded using a six point unidimensional scale. Table 3 presents the mean, mode, and standard deviation for each statement. These data further support the previously discussed unidimensional and free response data. Teachers indicated that the student's failure was under the student's control (Mo=5), that the student could very likely do passing work if s/he would put forth greater effort (Mo=5), and that that they had moderate expectations for the student's future work (Mo=3). This pattern of responses suggests, as did the previously discussed responses, that teachers view "low motivation" as a more or less stable trait. While they acknowledge that the student could improve his/her performance with increased effort, they report that they do not expect the student to be particularly successful in the future.

Teachers reported that, in interacting with the student, they were most likely to praise the student and least likely to criticize the student. They further reported a willingness to work with the student, an absence of feelings

of anger toward the student, the presence of feelings of sympathy, and an absence of feelings of guilt about the student's academic difficulties.

This pattern of responses is difficult to interpret from recent attributional perspectives. On one hand, the expectation is that teachers would express anger toward these students because the students were not "trying" (low effort) and would withhold help. According to Weiner (1984), anger is associated with a negative outcome that an observer believes is under the control of the person, and neglect (withholding help) is the behavioral consequence of anger. However, if one views these descriptions as contributing to the respondents' picture of themselves as "good" teachers, then the descriptions are more meaningful.

A pattern of self-enhancing descriptions is evident in these responses. Teachers reported that they would be very willing to help the student and that they would praise the student and feel sympathy for the student. They further indicated that they would be unlikely to criticize the student or to become angry with the student. While these characteristics may present the picture that teachers see as desirable for teachers, it is also paradoxical.

The paradox is one discussed by Tollefson and Chen (in press) and by Rodriguez (1985). Teachers did not seem to see any contradiction in reporting that they would be willing to help students even though they do not expect the student to be successful even with a teacher's help. They also report feeling sympathy for the student but little if any guilt about the student's inability to be successful in school. The absence of feelings of guilt probably stems from the fact that teacher's define achievement problems as being "the student's fault". Furthermore, it seems reasonable to speculate that teacher thinking progresses as follows: A student is doing unsatisfactory work. The teacher blames the student for the unsatisfactory work by attributing the failure to

student characteristics--most likely--"low motivation." However, the teacher who has been schooled "to help students" reports a willingness to help the student but does not hold high expectations for changing the student's achievement level and thus does not feel guilty or responsible when the student's performance does not improve or improves minimally.

Much has been written about the affective consequences of expending effort and failing (Covington & Omelich, 1979; Tollefson, 1986). It appears that when teachers and students with low achievement interact, they may both be acting in ways that protect their self-esteem. The student who appears to be poorly motivated may be protecting his/her view of him/her self as an able person. The teacher who expresses a willing to praise, to feel sympathy, and to help the student enhances his/her view of self as a "good" teacher but at the same time protects the self from threats to this sense of competence by setting low expectations for the student's future performance and by attributing the student's failure to stable student characteristics. If teachers were to set higher expectations and to attribute student achievement to their skills as a teacher, then continued student failure would represent teacher failure with commitant feelings of shame (low effort) or guilt (incompetence as a teacher).

## Educational Significance

This study provided evidence of the usefulness of an expanded attributional schemata. It further indicated that teachers tend to view student characteristics as most important in low achievement. Effort, particularly a stable pattern of low motivation, was the most frequently mentioned cause of low achievement. Attribution theory classifies effort as an unstable, internal factor. Data from this study suggested that teachers tended to view effort as a relatively stable, internal factor, particularly in the case of the low achieving student.

Teachers' responses also indicated that teachers experience high levels of frustration when they work with students who they perceive as unmotivated and as unwilling to attempt school tasks but that they try to cover these feelings of frustration by talking and acting like "good" teachers (i.e., always helpful, ready to praise, and reluctant to criticize or express anger). Their responses further indicate that these teachers may not understand the dynamics underlying low effort, low achievement, and students' attempts to maintain a sense of self worth.

Covington and Omelich (1979) and Tollefson, Tracy, Johnsen, Farmer, & Buenning (1984) have written about the dynamics underlying low effort, low achievement, and self-esteem. Perhaps it is time to consider incorporating study of self-worth theory and attribution retraining into preservice and inservice programs. These perspectives may aid teachers in working with the low achieving student who appears unmotivated and uncaring in the classroom.

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Table 1

Mean Ratings for the Descriptor Items for the Sample of Students Described

| Descriptor | M |
|---|---|
| Ability | 3.55 |
| Achievement | 2.35 |
| Effort | 2.20 |
| Acquired Characteristics | 2.59 |
| Attention to Academic Tasks | 2.43 |
| Peer Interactions | 3.43 |
| Physical/Mental Health | 4.00 |
| Family Involvement | 2.35 |

Ratings were provided on a 7-point scale where 7 would indicate high ability.

Table 2

Summary of Teachers' Responses to the Free Response Question

| Category | f | % |
|---|---|---|
| Ability | 2 | 4 |
| Typical Effort | 22 | 50 |
| Family | 13 | 30 |
| Acquired Characteristic | 9 | 21 |
| Interest in the Subject Matter | 5 | 11 |
| Attention | 5 | 11 |
| Previous Experience | 9 | 21 |
| Task Difficulty | 0 | 0 |
| Other Students | 3 | 7 |
| Teacher | 1 | 2 |
| Physiological | 1 | 2 |
| Task-specific emotional | 4 | 9 |
| Non-family-external | 2 | 4 |
| Emotional development | 2 | 4 |

Table 3

Means, Modes, and Standard Deviations for Teachers' Responses to the Expectancy, Affective, and Behavioral Statements

| Statements | M | SD | Mo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Willing to help | 4.96 | 1.27 | 6 |
| Liking to work with student | 4.30 | 1.21 | 4 |
| Likely to criticize student | 2.50 | .97 | 2 |
| Likely to praise student | 4.53 | 1.22 | 5 |
| Likely to feel sympathy for the student | 4.13 | 1.43 | 5 |
| Likely to feel anger toward student | 2.73 | 1.14 | 2 |
| Likely to feel guilty | 2.75 | 1.18 | 2 |
| Achievement under student's control | 4.03 | 1.21 | 5 |
| Could improve with effort | 4.90 | 1.37 | 5 |
| Expectancy for future success | 3.13 | 1.11 | 3 |

Ratings were provided on a 6-point scale.